

TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

John Bernhard

YOU, JACK, AND PETER

THREE YEARS SINCE you set foot in a chapel. You are hundreds of miles and light years down the path of the prodigal. The problem is, it is still in you. It still resonates in your heart. There you are: Chatting up the missionaries at the front door, talking very familiarly with them, as if you have been friends forever; giving them hope, giving them an idea that you could be their golden prospect, their story for the books, their treasured memory to take with them to the grave, their “when I baptized so-and-so and the finger of God touched the water in the baptismal font and made it glow, that was when I knew why I served my mission!” moment.

And then you're:

Avoiding their phone calls, hiding out from their house calls, not answering the door. They must feel so bad standing out there in the cold, tapping on the door once, twice, three times, waiting and waiting, hoping forever that you'll let them in so they can talk about their Book of Mormon, wishing you'd give them a chance to show how dedicated they are to their Lord. They want so badly to be enthusiastic and congenial and warm and welcoming. And you're making them wait out there in the dark.

Then you're:

Daydreaming about eternity and life together with your wife and daughter and how wonderful that would really be—and you know these Mormons believe in this hopeful message, however loosey goosey and ridiculous the logistics are. How do you explain to your Gentile wife that you once believed you can be a family with your wife and kids, even though she logically states that it would mean every one of us are brothers, fathers, sons, and sisters, and wives, and . . . you get the picture, you know? Even with all the loosey goosey logic, though, you still secretly wish it could all be true.

Then you're:

Gadmouthing the Church's legendary propensity for spiriting away troubling facts and historical documents from its followers. In a cave. In a vault. Ten miles below the ground. Only tunnels get you in, as long as you have enough hole punches in your temple recommend.

HERE'S no recommend, not anymore. All you care about is finding out why a Church that swears in holy ceremony to be the One and Only True Church in the Universe thinks it is perfectly normal to maintain a secret vault full of historical records and letters and meaningful postcards and court rulings and journals kept by its highest-ranking leaders.

When you're through worrying about secret papers and vaults, you really have only a simple wish:

That your six-month old daughter could have an experience like Primary. It is a wonderful enterprise, an astonishingly humble and amazing little socialization program for children; even little babies that are a mere eighteen-months old are given an opportunity to be together with other kids, even if it means being herded into a room for two hours each Sunday and being cared for by three grim, single women and the newly married couple living in the cheap apartments on the other side of the ward boundaries. You think about Mormonism and the faith that left you behind, and you ache suddenly to share Primary with your daughter. The Sunbeams. The seven-year-olds. Ah, the eight-year-olds, the ones getting baptized that year. Then you have the hip and sassy ten-year-olds, and the can't-wait-to-escape-this-hell eleven-year-olds. Not seeing your new daughter be a part of this Sabbath morning scene . . . it hurts more than you expect.

So you take the discussions, you give 'em a shot. Those young boys are so excited

you let them in.

Deep down, though, you know you can't go back, not after what happened, not after the High Council heard your mistakes, listened to your testimony, and mistakenly failed to see the context, the surrounding scenery, the pool of blood at the crime scene, the drunk bus driver in a big, messy metaphorical bus crash up on the highway. They failed to recognize any of your family's complete failure as a group, the facts surrounding your dad, your mom, your sisters, you, and your brothers. They didn't see a bit of it when they threw the Mormon bible at you on the way out the door.

The final eviction notice came from the High Council. Fifteen men—all of them clad in suits from Mr. Mac, each of them possessing a varying intensity of Old Mormon Guy breath (which, as any well-heeled member knows is a dry, stale, pungent reek that results after mornings of prayer, offering blessings and ordinations, meetings, scripture discussions, along with the requisite backslapping and glad-handing and smiling at freaks and friends in the name of the Lord.) They had to have been upset because of the long day they'd endured; maybe they knew they needed a Tic Tac (badly). But you've gone and disrupted their late-Sunday evening by making a stupid mistake that no one understands. You can't go back to them, not after all of that, not after they gave you the pink slip twice, not after you pleaded with them not to, not after they prayed and lamented and debated your merits and then decided . . . you didn't belong.

BUT you still entertain the missionaries, keep them at the end of that rope, keep them dangling just a little, hoping someday your gentile wife will someday, somehow figure out a way to rationalize the crazy logic and want to join.

You don't tell her that, though, because even after everything, how can you still want to go back? You could never tell your wife you secretly still believe, the residue may never wear away.

So there you are, Peter Priesthood and Jack Mormon in a messy human package. You still stare at cloud formations and think how cool and elegant and orderly and traditional the hierarchy of Mormon priesthood power is to you. Then you realize there are tenets and beliefs and illogical what-ifs that will likely keep you away forever. Still, you've gotten to become friends with both of them, Peter and Jack. At least you'll have some good company along the way. You hope. ☺

JOHN BERNHARD was excommunicated from the Church in 2002. Since then, he's enjoyed hearing his voice echo in a hollow room, spent many sleepless nights wondering what it's all for, and praising God in heaven for his lovely new bride and beautiful baby daughter. He resides in Los Angeles.